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ABSTRACT

Generally, classroom discourse in foreign language teaching and learning is formalized and does not contain impromptu speech. However, analysis of classroom discourse in a German university foreign language course revealed that teachers' evaluative acts (followups) and "glides" linking one teacher-learner exchange to another do contain impromptu elements. In addition, they are more heavily dominated by the teacher's native language, presumably to exercise control, even unintentionally, over the learners' performance. On the other hand, the general absence of impromptu speech in learners' utterances may be due to lack of opportunity for learners to plan their utterances creatively. It is ironic that teachers are prone to use impromptu speech elements in classroom discourse in order to prevent their learners from using them.
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OBSERVATIONS RELATED TO IMPROMPTU
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Observations related to impromptu elements in classroom discourse and to the function of such elements in foreign language teaching and learning

Abstract. As a rule, classroom discourse in foreign language teaching and learning is fairly strictly formalized and, thus, does not contain impromptu speech. Discourse analysis, however, reveals that evaluative acts of teachers (follow-ups) as well as 'glides' which link one teacher-learner-exchange to the next do contain impromptu elements. They are, moreover, heavily dominated by the source language of the teacher (German). It is supposed that such impromptu elements in an otherwise formal discourse are (unintentionally) meant to exercise control over the learners' performance. – On the other hand, a general absence of impromptu speech in learners' utterances is obvious. It is supposed that classroom discourse does not give the learners a real chance to plan their utterances creatively. Thus, ironically, teachers are prone to use impromptu elements in classroom discourse in order to prevent their learners from using them themselves.

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This paper deals with observations related to impromptu elements in classroom discourse and to the function of such elements in foreign language teaching and learning. The topic will be dealt with under two aspects. One aspect concerns the use of impromptu speech by teachers when conversing with pupils in the foreign language and is based on empirical data which were collected and analysed at the University of Essen (Lörscher, forthcoming). The other aspect concerns impromptu speech as used – or rather as *not* used – by learners when conversing in the foreign language within the frame of a formal teaching situation, and to what degree this should be taught and can be taught. These observations, too, depend on the empirical data mentioned, though not by way of explaining what was found in them, but by way of commenting on phenomena which these data obviously lack.

The hypothesis underlying both aspects, and thus their common denominator, is the assumption that impromptu speech plays an important role in foreign language teaching and learning which, however, has so far been largely unnoticed.

1.1.

Difficult as impromptu speech is to define, it is certainly marked by features of spontaneity enacted in real time (essays in Dechert and Raupach 1980). This means that features of preparedness and of routine are lacking (Enkvist, in this volume). At first sight, it may, therefore, be doubtful whether impromptu speech is symptomatic of classroom discourse at all, because this type of discourse is known to be fairly strictly formalized and rigidly patterned (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975).

In order to gain insight into the structure of classroom discourse in foreign language teaching and learning, we video-taped several lessons, transcribed the discourse and analysed it with the help of Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) model, which, however, was expanded and elaborated during the analysing process. The expansion mainly consists of defining more acts and finding means to describe subtler hierarchical relations than the original model supplies (Hüllen and Lörcher 1979; Lörcher, in press).

For this analytical study, a type of lesson was chosen which is very frequent in German schools. It consists of a conversation between teacher and class on a topic which is known to both of them from their previous work with texts. The technical term for this type of lesson is 'wiederholendes Unterrichtsgespräch' (repetition by conversation in class). It is supposed to approach natural communication. It holds a middle position between formal explanations (e.g. on grammar or on the meaning of words) or formal practising on the one hand, and free conversation on the other, which, however, is very rare in formal language teaching. The main feature of 'repetition by conversation in class' which sets it apart from natural conversation is its being tied to a previously given text.

Our material was analysed under several aspects, e.g. as to the relationship between utterances in class and the textbook, and as to its hierarchical structure. With reference to impromptu elements the following observations were made:

The most obvious features of discourse in foreign language classes prove it to be *not* impromptu. This applied, e.g., to the ritualization of openings and closings which, in most cases, violates the rules that govern natural openings and closings in everyday conversation (Schegloff 1972; Schegloff and Sacks 1973; Edmondson and House 1981).

Ritualized openings and closings in school are mainly determined by external factors: that the partners in conversation are, as a rule, one teacher and a whole class; that the teacher's role dominates the role of learners by virtue of his/her profession, age and knowledge; that the beginning and ending of discourse is set by a schedule; that proxemic relations between communicants underlie conventional rules; and so on.

These openings and closings, by virtue of their ritualization, are essentially L1. That is, even when given in the foreign language, they seem to belong to the institution 'school' in general and are no real part of foreign language communication. Except for individual and rather exceptional cases, they tend to belong to the pedagogic discourse, not to the target discourse (Edmondson and House 1981) in class. In these openings and closings German learners meet their German teacher in a German school, and this is why they are actually often verbalized in German, even with teachers who otherwise make a point of only using the foreign language.

Classroom discourse, furthermore, is structured by a rigid turn-taking system which, again, violates many rules that apply to natural conversation (Sacks *et al.* 1974). Nearly always turn-taking is organized in such a way that the current speaker (teacher) selects the next (learner), and that then the right to speak falls back on the first one (teacher). There are occasional deviations from this, which may be planned or which may just occur. How strictly the system is kept up depends on the age of the learners. As a rule, however, not even a class of grown-ups disputes the right of the teacher to speak whenever he/she wants to, a right which is supposed to be based on his/her didactic responsibility (Mehan 1979).

In its most typical form, discourse in a foreign language class consists of an elicitation uttered by the teacher and a response uttered by a pupil. The exchange between the two is then completed by a follow-up, an evaluative utterance by the teacher. The elicitation typically consists of a question, a fragmentary sentence, or just an utterance with some elicitive purpose. The learner's response meets this elicitation with an answer, the remainder

of the sentence, or another utterance — all of them being speech acts whose semantic contents are previously given and whose syntactic structure is often — though not always — pre-patterned either by the next (in the memories of teacher and learners) or by the elicitation of the teacher. The special form of the elicitation may be planned in order to stimulate a certain response, e.g., a certain structure or lexical item. The verbalization of follow-ups will be returned to in section 1.2.

As a rule, the learners know of the match between elicitation and response; that is, they know what they are expected to say. Thus, neither the teacher's elicitation nor the learner's responses are tokens of impromptu speech. Even if the teacher has not pre-planned his/her questions and does leave his/her learners a certain choice in their answers, there still is a set of constraints (created by the text, the teacher's general plan for the lesson and the learners' eagerness to say the right thing) whose interplay precludes free and impromptu speaking. This accounts for special features of didactic discourse which set it apart from natural discourse, e.g., its specific back channel items (Duncan 1974; Duncan and Niederehe 1974) and its lack of gambits (Edmondson and House 1981). Another highly important contribution to didactic discourse is given by those evaluative follow-ups which tell the learner about the quality of his/her performance in the judgement of the teacher and which seem to be indispensable. They give the classroom discourse a triple structure (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975, Coulthard 1978, Coulthard and Brazil 1979, Streeck 1979) in which elicitation — response is to be looked upon as one adjacency pair which then becomes the first part of a second adjacency pair consisting of elicitation/response and evaluation (Mehan 1978: 42; Lörcher, forthcoming).

Items of impromptu speech may of course appear in classroom discourse, just as deviations from the triple structure do. But they are not characteristic and will even be looked upon as slips of the tongue which ought not to occur. This applies to teacher and learners alike.

1.2.

Our empirical data, however, show that the evaluative acts which regularly follow the elicitation-response pair are — contrary to elicitations and re-

sponses — strongly marked by impromptu features. These follow-ups are hardly ever realized by completed sentences. Instead words like 'yes', 'right', 'no', 'okay', 'wrong', 'well', 'ah', 'hm' are preferred. They are nearly always accompanied by distinct non-verbal signs like nodding, shaking one's head, gestures, facial expressions, body movements, steps etc. Typically, there are beginnings of sentences which are never completed, false starts, repetitions, filled pauses. There are also repetitions and chains of interjections.

In one stretch of discourse of 150 acts there occurred 43 evaluatives (plus 3 corrections of mistakes). They consisted of 'yes' (falling intonation), 'yes' (rising intonation), 'yes please', 'mhm', 'and' (rising intonation), 'right' (falling intonation), '(very) good', 'aha', and repetition of a constituent of the learner's utterance or of the whole utterance. Chains were linked together with up to three elements (like 'yes, right, okay'). These evaluatives were even inserted by the teacher when he himself had given an explanation, which means that he evaluated his own performance.

Two observations about the impromptu form of these evaluative acts could be made:

i. They are heavily dominated by the source language (in this case German) of the teacher. *Yes/Ja, right/richtig, wrong/falsch, no/nein, perhaps/vielleicht* occur particularly often with *yes* holding the absolute record, obviously triggered by the ambiguous and frequent *ja* as an interjection and *Abtönpartikel* in German. This interference of German impromptu elements also accounts for the total absence of expressions like *fine, I see, well done, good girl*, which can be heard time and again in genuine English classrooms.

Even teachers who normally make a point of conducting the entire conversation in English will fall back on German interjections like *ja, ach, aha, so*. Needless to say, the accompanying non-verbal signs are all German.

ii. It is typical of foreign language classroom discourse that evaluatives refer either to topical or to formal correctness of learners' utterances or to both at once. As topics usually are well-known or trivial, reference to formal correctness is much more frequent and obviously taken much more seriously than reference to topical correctness. Formal mistakes are looked upon as 'real' mistakes, whereas topical misunderstandings, if they occur, are more easily forgiven (Enkvist 1973).

It is obvious from our empirical data and from wide classroom observation that learners always know whether formal correctness or topical correctness or both are referred to by an evaluative act of their teacher. The store of impromptu elements is obviously distinctly differentiated into those which comment on formal correctness and those which comment on topical correctness. Positive evaluatives mostly refer to both, whereas negative evaluatives may refer to one or the other. Our empirical data have not yielded one single case of misunderstanding in this respect. Apart from the choice of special verbal elements, it obviously is the accompanying non-verbal sign which makes clear which sort of evaluative act was intended.

The choice of impromptu elements for follow-ups seems to be highly idiosyncratic. In this respect, teachers differ widely in their communicative means and pupils seem to get used to their teacher's kind of evaluation of their work fairly quickly.

With the sequence of elicitation/response-evaluative being the essential exchange unit in classroom discourse, gliding over from the evaluative follow-up to the next elicitation, which opens the next unit, gains particular importance. It is the point in classroom discourse where a step forward is made and which, therefore, is most important for teacher and learners alike. This glide is very often realized as a planning pause (empty or filled) and contains more false starts, repetitions and interjections than usual. Most frequent is the word *yes*, obviously again an intruder from German. It is often very difficult to distinguish where the evaluative of the previous unit ends and the glide to the next unit begins. Again, learners seem to understand this link between the previous and the next exchange of classroom discourse very well.

1.3

Linguistic analysis of discourse in foreign language classes, as far as it has been described here, yields an interesting system of communication with the evaluatives and glides as important items. At least four functions may be attributed to them:

- i.* They are planning spans for the teacher. In particular repetition of constituents or whole utterances of learners give him/her time to plan and start performing his/her next elicitation.
- ii.* They act as a lubricant for the discourse. They make elicitations and responses follow each other smoothly and in a manner which does not place too much stress on the learners.
- iii.* They fulfil a distinct didactic purpose in that they give reinforcement and/or motivation and/or information to the learner.
- iv.* They manipulate the learners' attention and their awareness of what is happening in class. They do this by giving confidence with the help of (positive) evaluation and by arousing their attention for the next elicitation.

Which of these functions prevail and in which relationship they stand to each other needs further clarification. Here, too, idiosyncrasies of teachers may be found. One way to clarify all this is to have learners evaluate and explain their own and their teacher's behaviour after it has been videotaped.

Our data and our observations of general classroom behaviour make us assume that the fourth function could be the most important one and might be a key for the understanding of what happens in a foreign language class. Notice that all this happens in German surroundings, within a German school. This gives a fictitious character to the conversational exchanges in a foreign language, and because of this, pupils obviously depend heavily on the reaction of their teachers to their own performance. In contrast to everyday conversation in their own language, learners expect to be either acknowledged or corrected. This evaluation is rendered in English – as is everything else – but in a special kind of English which, contrary to the elicitation/response interplay, is stamped by impromptu elements and by the source language of teacher and learners. Impromptu performance seems nearest to the linguistic personality of everyone involved and, thus, more susceptible to their source language than other parts of the discourse. There seems to appear a basic mutual understanding between teacher and learners about the classroom situation and what goes on there. Its signs are the ritualized openings and

closings as well as the impromptu acts and possibly other elements. The elicitation/response exchanges in the foreign language are embraced by this understanding and would probably not function if it failed (Hüllen 1976: 32-47). One of the difficulties German learners of English encounter when they first meet a native speaker (inside or outside the classroom) is that there are different evaluatives of what goes on and whether their performance in a foreign language was right or wrong.

2.1

The point of departure for the second aspect under which the form and functions of impromptu elements in classroom discourse is to be considered is the conspicuous absence of such elements in learners' utterances. What we found frequently were hesitation phenomena – as a rule, filled pauses – within the first constituent of after subordinated clauses. Occasionally, constituents were repeated (Fathman 1980). We did not carry out exact investigations into location and frequency of such and other phenomena, comparing L1 and L2 performance in this respect. But it is our distinct impression that impromptu elements are comparatively rare in foreign-language use. One reason for this is the fact that learners' responses mostly consist of one sentence or even one constituent of a sentence only; moreover, teachers seem to look at such behaviour with suspicion because they tend to make learners repeat their utterances whenever impromptu interruptions occur.

2.2

Communication may be defined as rule-governed behaviour. It can be broken down into two time-related phases: the planning phase and the realization phase (Faerch/Kasper 1980). The planning phase embraces the setting up of a communicative goal, the planning process and the actual plan; the realization phase embraces the plan, the realization process and the action of speaking or writing itself. It is difficult to describe the complex patterns of interaction within these two phases; it is also difficult to find out the exact timing between them, because realization of a speech utterance is, at the same time, a feed-back for the planning process and may lead to re-planning.

The planning process, as well as the realization process, are potentially conscious. Problem-oriented anticipation of difficulties in realizing the plan and getting the realization process on its way leads to certain strategies by which the foreign-language producer tries either to avoid or to overcome the difficulties which he/she faces (Bausch/Kasper 1979, Faerch/Kasper 1980). If there are no difficulties envisaged the whole process goes on automatically.

So far, it is very difficult to attribute particular phenomena of verbal behaviour to particular phases between setting the goal and carrying out the action. It is safe, however, to say that the phenomena of impromptu speech indicate the strategies of planning and realizing speech. The more accurately the path from the communicative goal via the planning process to the plan and via the realization process to the action has been worked out, the less impromptu the utterance will be. Putting it the other way round: impromptu phenomena betray that a speaker is still somewhere on his/her way between the goal and the action; that he/she anticipates difficulties and rearranges his/her planning; that he/she is finally successful or not. The overt language product is an indicator of the covert process that makes it (Seliger 1980).

It is unclear to what extent the traces of mental planning in the linguistic utterance are speaker specific or learner specific. Time-related phenomena seem to be typical for all language producers; semantic phenomena, however, seem to be significant for the learner's impromptu speech. To the latter belong substitution of general words for (unknown) particular ones which occurs after hesitation phenomena or pauses, impromptu ways of paraphrase and word coinage, code switching, and communication with non-verbal means (Bausch, forthcoming).

If we analyse our observations relating to the nature of learners' speech in formal settings in relation to this general theoretical background, we can venture the following general statements:

i. In formal situations, learners are hardly ever able to go through all phases, from setting a communicative goal to planning and speaking. The procedures of teaching favour a speech performance in which the finding of semantic concepts and the communicative intentions is not the decision of learners, but is predetermined for them by the teacher, the textbook or other determinants. Frequently, even the choice of lexical and syntactic means for an utterance is limited by gradation. This prevents learners from scanning their linguistic resources when planning speech (Hüllen, in press).

One consequence of this type of teaching is that learners' utterances frequently sound so much more correct than utterances of native speakers. It is, however, a perfection which is achieved at the cost of creativity. If, as was postulated, impromptu features indicate normal mental procedures in speech production, it follows from this that such features are an important part of learners' interlanguage.

From this, again, it follows that learners must not be spared the steps from setting the goal to the action of speaking or writing, because only in going through this mental procedure can they find the necessary hypothetical rules, test them, find them confirmed or rejected, and thus develop them into correct generalizations. The narrow path along which learners are often led by over-conscientious teachers may cause them to utter correct sentences, but it may prevent them from learning how these correct sentences are arrived at mentally under normal communicative circumstances.

ii. The distinction has been made between 'correctors' and 'planners', and it is one which corresponds to the distinction between 'high input generators' and 'low input generators' (Seliger 1980). The role of both types of language users in L1 need not concern us here. For the use of L2 it is important to notice that the teaching practice we are referring to seems to breed 'planners' and 'low input generators'. However, 'corrected' speech is much more redundant than 'planned' speech, which means that the former is more easily understood (Seleskovitch, in this volume). An utterance which carries the traces of its being planned along with it gives the receiver ample opportunities to follow the putting together of its structure, to anticipate its chain of forms and guess its meaning. An utterance which comes out perfect, on the other hand, only allows the receiver to follow its flow step by step.

Thus, foreign-language teaching is prone to produce less redundant and less understandable language, which certainly cannot be the intention of teachers. There may also be cultural side-effects that accompany the one or the other type of utterance. It is difficult to say anything that has been empirically proved about this, but some observations suggest that it is not linguistic perfection that arouses sympathy and strengthens the will to communicate (Beneke 1980).

iii. The reason why restructuring is so rare in learners' language may become more apparent on closer examination. With practice in impromptu techniques it is perhaps possible for the speaker of a foreign language to develop the confidence that is present in first-language usage. With this confidence, a speaker can tolerate an utterance break-down because of the knowledge that restructuring is possible. In using a foreign language, speakers are often reluctant or afraid to do this because they fear that after the first difficulty they may encounter more serious ones. It does not seem feasible to teach impromptu techniques, because their very nature restricts this. But it does seem advisable that learners in formal teaching settings find much more room to use them (Edmondson/House 1981).

When learners leave the secluded classroom and face unprotected everyday communication, a certain shock probably cannot be completely avoided. It is the teacher's task to prepare them for this shock; therefore, learners should, at least occasionally, be encouraged to use strategies which are learner specific, such as lexical substitution from one's own language and literal translation.

3.

Our observations relating to impromptu elements in classroom discourse and to the functions of such elements in foreign-language teaching and learning show the – up to now – undiscovered importance of this kind of speech both for the teacher/learner contact and for the development of learners' abilities. It is an ironic twist that teachers should use impromptu elements in order to control classroom discourse in a very special way and, by the very act of doing this, should more or less prevent their students from learning them. This does not, of course, imply any criticism of teachers, who are probably unaware of these intricacies. It does, however, imply the necessity of envisaging new teaching methods which give learners ample room to learn creatively.

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